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Scottish Literary Review, Volume 8, Number 2, Autumn/Winter 2016, pp. 113-131 (Article)

Published by Association for Scottish Literary Studies

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Abstract

The novels of O. Douglas [Anna Buchan] have been overlooked by scholars of Scottish women's writing in part because of their apparent artlessness and simplicity. Yet their seeming artlessness represents a purposeful artistic choice. This essay contends that Douglas's novels develop an aesthetics of the ordinary by asserting the ethical value of mundane forms of beauty – a verdant garden, a becoming hat, a nicely laid table, or an apt metaphor. Douglas's aesthetic philosophy has religious and economic implications. Novels including *Penny Plain* (1920), *Pink Sugar* (1924), and *The Proper Place* (1926) challenge Free Church ambivalence towards the indulgence of aesthetic pleasure by representing everyday beauty as a source of happiness and moral amelioration. Douglas suggests that it is the responsibility of Scotland's affluent upper middle class to bring small beauties into the lives of the less fortunate, and to teach the lower middle class how to appreciate the pleasures such ordinary beauty affords. By offering their readers instances of everyday beauty, Douglas's novels participated in this educative process, helping to shape a formative middle-class Scottish identity.

Anna Buchan (1877–1948), author of twelve novels, was one of the publishing house Hodder and Stoughton's top-selling writers between the First and Second World Wars.[1] Yet Buchan's name is all but absent from major surveys of Scottish literary history, and not simply because she published her novels under the pseudonym O. Douglas.[2] In her autobiography, *Unforgettable, Unforgotten* (1945), Buchan explains that she chose to use this pseudonym – borrowed from the protagonist and narrator of her first novel *Olivia in India* (1912) – because her eldest brother John 'had given lustre to the name of Buchan which any efforts of mine would not be likely to add to'.[3] Ironically, when O. Douglas is mentioned by literary historians

at all, it is usually as the sister of John Buchan, author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) and *Greenmantle* (1916), among other adventure stories. Early editions of Douglas's novels still linger in second-hand bookshops, but only two – *Pink Sugar* (1924) and *The Day of Small Things* (1930) – have been reprinted recently, and these by the self-described 'very niche' Greyladies Press, whose slogan is 'Well-mannered Books by Ladies Long Gone'.[4] Evoking genteel conversation over dainty tea cups, this slogan perhaps gives some indication of why Douglas has fallen so completely out of literary history. Her fiction, like so many so-called middlebrow novels of the interwar period seems, in Alison Light's words, 'resistant to analysis' in its 'apparent artlessness and insistence on its own ordinariness'.[5] Yet Douglas's novels suggest that the ordinary is never entirely 'resistant to analysis'. Instead they develop an aesthetics of the ordinary, asserting the ethical value of mundane forms of beauty – a colourful arrangement of flowers, a well-cut piece of clothing, a tastefully decorated room, or even just an apt metaphor. Offering her own novels as an embodiment of this aesthetics of the ordinary, Douglas advocates the importance of everyday beauties to a formative middle-class Scottish identity.

Thanks largely to this aesthetics of the ordinary, Douglas's novels do not feature in studies of the Scottish Renaissance, which tend to concentrate primarily on male modernists such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Louis Grassic Gibbon.[6] Although Douglas published her earliest novels at the height of British modernism, they are not concerned with art for art's sake, with making it new, or with delving into the depths of human consciousness. Instead they are paradigmatic examples of what Nicola Humble has termed the 'feminine middlebrow', a type of fiction that emerged between the First and Second World Wars along with an 'expanded suburban middle class, more affluent, [and] newly leisured'.[7] In many respects, early twentieth-century middlebrow novels differ little from the Victorian realist novel, sharing with their predecessors 'a particular concentration on feminine aspects of life, a fascination with domestic space, a concern with courtship and marriage, a preoccupation with aspects of class and manners'.[8] But the Great War had irrevocably transformed Britain's class structure, and with it, women's position within and without the home.[9] The middlebrow novels of the 1920s and '30s played a significant part in forging a new middle-class identity that included former members of the declining gentry and the rising working class, and in establishing women's place within this newly

expanded middle class. Although Douglas's novels are deeply invested in shaping the manners and mores of a formative Scottish middle class, they have been overlooked in recent studies of interwar middlebrow fiction, which have focused exclusively on English writers such as Rose Macaulay, Margaret Kennedy, and Winifred Holtby.[10]

The aim of this essay is thus to explore O. Douglas's development of a specifically Scottish version of the feminine middlebrow novel, one deeply influenced by Free Church Presbyterianism. I will argue that Douglas's aesthetics of the ordinary responds to Free Church ambivalence towards fiction by advocating the moral value of aesthetic pleasure. Her novels repeatedly suggest that it is the responsibility of Scotland's upper middle class to bring small beauties into the lives of others, and to teach them how to enjoy such aesthetic pleasure. By embodying middle-class standards of taste and propriety, Douglas's novels participated in the educative process that they depict.

It is fitting that Douglas's aesthetics of the ordinary responds to Free Church thought, because, as Callum G. Brown's observes, the Free Church was 'dominated by the ethos and style of the bourgeoisie'.[11] Drawing its adherents primarily from the middle classes, the Free Church fostered an ethos of hard work, self-reliance, thrift, and sobriety in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Scotland. While these values contributed to the development of industrial capitalism, Free Church Presbyterianism, haunted by the vestiges of Calvinism, also tended to discourage artistic and literary creativity, construing imagination as the devil's snare and fiction as mere lies. As Cairns Craig explains in *The Modern Scottish Novel*, 'For generations of Scottish writers, the created word has been caught in an inevitable conflict with the Word of creation, and this profound awareness of the necessary evil of the work of art is one of the determining elements of the Scottish novel'.[12] To write fiction, or even simply to read it, was to indulge in the supposedly frivolous pleasures of imagination which offered a dangerous distraction from everyday duties. Although the Reverend John Buchan was a clergyman in the United Free Church, he does not seem to have imposed these beliefs too rigorously on his family. In her autobiography, Anna Buchan describes a father who introduced his children to border ballads and the novels of his hero Walter Scott, and who encouraged them to enjoy the Bible 'not [. . .] because it was the Word of Life, but because it was full of such grand stories'.[13]

Nonetheless, O. Douglas's novels reveal that their author was well aware of Presbyterian suspicions of the pleasures to be found in art and literature. *Eliza for Common* (1928) depicts a family closely based on Buchan's own: Mr. Laidlaw is a minister in the Free Church, but it is Mrs. Laidlaw who is genuinely troubled when their eldest son Jim decides to become a novelist rather than following his father into the ministry.[14] Mrs. Laidlaw belongs to a generation brought up 'never to read in the daytime' because reading wastes time that could be spent working; and she continually chides her daughter Eliza, 'Your head, my dear, is too full of poetry and plays to have room for the things that really matter'.[15] As Eliza completes her daily tasks, she often muses 'grimly on the great gulf that seemed to be fixed between life in books and life as it was lived at Blinkbonny', the Laidlaws' home in the Glasgow suburbs.[16] Perhaps Eliza's reading has given her unrealistic expectations of how life *could* be lived, but there is certainly some truth in her perception of Blinkbonny as 'ugly and drab'.[17] Jean Jardine, the protagonist of *Penny Plain* (1920), is more pious and less prone to questioning religious doctrine than Eliza. She has been raised by a great-aunt who had 'come out at the Disruption' and who was 'frightfully religious – a strict Calvinist – and taught Jean to regard everything from the point of view of her own death-bed'.[18] Jean's ways of thinking are challenged and eventually transformed by Pamela Reston, an aristocrat who is visiting the small border town of Priorsford from London. Jean fears that Great-Aunt Alison would have regarded Pamela, with her talk of 'clothes, cities, theatres, pictures' as 'the personification of the World, the Flesh, and the Devil'; but she also acknowledges that Pamela has 'brought colour into all our lives'.[19] Through the tasteful touches with which she decorates her rooms and her person, Pamela shows Jean that there is no inherent virtue in choosing the plain over the ornamental, or the colourless over colour.

Despite the intensity of her early religious training, Jean has developed a deep love of literature even before she meets Pamela. When Pamela first enters the Jardines' cottage, she notices that 'books were everywhere: a few precious ones behind glass doors, hundreds in low bookcases round the room'.[20] Pamela quickly realises that although Jean has 'lived year in and year out in a small country town' she is 'in no way provincial', because she has read so widely.[21] Jean's love of literature, and especially of poetry, prepares her to appreciate other, lesser aesthetic pleasures.

The moral worth of Douglas's characters, and particularly of her female

characters, can be measured by their love of literature; and it is through their discussions of reading that Douglas attempts to defend her own literary endeavours against what she clearly felt might be a possible accusation against them: that writing fiction is frivolous waste of time. The most extended of such defences occurs in *Pink Sugar* (1924), which, in an instance of the authorial self-representation that Victoria Stewart finds characteristic of middlebrow fiction, features a novelist called Merren Strang who writes under the pen-name Jean Hill and who is obviously a figure for Douglas herself.[22] Merren explains to the novel's protagonist Kirsty Gilmour that she began to write during the Great War out of a sense of duty:

> I did what work I could, but I had some spare time when one simply did not dare to have spare time – and the thought came to me to write a book, something simple that would make pleasant reading – you see, there's nothing of Art for Art's sake about me. I thought of all the sad people, and the tired and anxious people, and the sick people. Have you ever had any one lie very ill in a nursing home while you haunted lending libraries and bookshops for something that would help through sleepless nights for him? If you have, you will know how difficult it is to get the right kind of books. Merely clever books are of no use, for a very sick person has done with cleverness. You need a book very much less and very much more than that.[23]

Merren understands authorship as a useful profession, a way of increasing the comfort and happiness of those who are suffering, whether physically or psychologically. Merren's aims as an author recall Douglas's remark in her unpublished work that she could imagine 'no higher recompense' as a writer than 'to be told [her] books have cheered and helped people'.[24] Novels, for Douglas as for Merren Strang, should distract us from the sometimes inevitable dreariness or downright unhappiness of daily existence. In contrast to the 'merely clever books' that seek to instruct or dazzle readers with their complexity, Douglas's novels aim to 'touch the heart' or to make readers feel better, in part by reminding them of life's mundane pleasures and ordinary beauties.[25]

The reading habits of Douglas's characters reveal a great deal about the middle-class audience for whom she wrote and the middlebrow standards of taste that her fiction embodies. Hugh Kenner has identified three reader-

ships in early twentieth-century Britain: one that consumed the 'sensationalist' fiction often included in magazines and newspapers, another that appreciated high modernism, and a third middlebrow audience that enjoyed literary classics and bestsellers.[26] Douglas carefully positions her characters, and by implication her novels, in this third category. *Pink Sugar*'s heroine Kirsty and her Aunt Fanny are great admirers of Merren Strang's novels, and perhaps represent Douglas's ideal reader, one who turns to fiction for psychological comfort and tasteful entertainment. Aunt Fanny 'cannot endure those modern books which launch the reader into unknown seas without chart or compass' and dislikes novels that touch upon 'any unsavoury subject'.[27] Not for Aunt Fanny the narrative complexities of James Joyce's or Virginia Woolf's novels on one hand, or the 'unsavoury' allusions of Ethel M. Dell's racy romances or Michael Arlen's exotic thrillers on the other. Kirsty, more widely read and more catholic in her tastes than her elderly aunt, is particularly fond of Mary and Jane Findlater's *Crossriggs* (1908), which she and Merren both know 'almost by heart'.[28] *Crossriggs*, an account of the attachments and frustrations of the inhabitants of a small Scottish village, is in many ways a precursor to Douglas's own novels. Through this allusion, Douglas writes herself into a Scottish tradition of women's middlebrow fiction, one that does not aim either to challenge or titillate its readers, but rather to entertain them with embellished versions of their own everyday reality.

Douglas's novels do not simply seek to define good taste; they also aim to cultivate it in readers. The purveyors of good taste in Douglas's fiction – the characters who model it for readers – belong almost exclusively to the upper middle class. It is the particular duty of the upper-middle-class women in her novels to bring small beauties into the lives of those less fortunate than themselves and to teach them to appreciate the aesthetic pleasures of everyday life. Before exploring the implications of this educative process, I want to illustrate the significant socio-economic changes that Douglas observed in Scotland following the end of World War I, taking *The Proper Place* (1926) and its sequel *The Day of Small Things* (1930) as examples. It is perhaps worth noting first that even in her own time Douglas's sense of social hierarchy might have been considered snobbish. As a reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* observed dryly in 1920, Douglas does not write novels 'that the Marxian kind of person would like. Nor does the author like the Marxian kind of person'.[29] Douglas has little

interest in the working classes except, fleetingly, as the recipients of well-meant charity. She is concerned entirely with distinguishing among various elements of Britain's newly expanded middle class, and with teaching the newly wealthy to understand the moral and aesthetic codes of the declining gentry so that they might spend their money wisely.

Through the interconnected stories of the Rutherfurd women and the Jackson family, *The Proper Place* and *The Day of Small Things* trace the decline of the 'County' people or gentry in rural Scotland and the increasing socio-economic power of the mercantile middle class. Following her brothers' and father's deaths during the war, Nicole Rutherfurd and her mother Lady Jane can no longer afford to maintain the family estate in Peeblesshire, and move to the small seaside town of Kirkmeikle in Fife. The Rutherfurd estate is purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Jackson, who have made their money in manufacturing, but who began their married life in a 'semi-detached villa' called Abbotsford on the outskirts of Glasgow.[30] In naming a house consisting of 'just six rooms and a kitchen' after Walter Scott's estate, the Jacksons reveal their longstanding aspirations to become 'County' folk.[31] Yet purchasing Rutherfurd does not automatically win them acceptance among the landed families of Peeblesshire. The endearingly gauche Mrs. Jackson is only too well aware of her social shortcomings among the gentry, explaining, 'I can never be natural: I've to watch myself all the time, for the things I say, just ordinary things, seem to surprise the people here'.[32] But her husband understands that upwards mobility is a multi-generational process: his 'own father rose from being a workman to a master' in the factory that Mr. Jackson now owns,[33] and he determines that his son Andrew will learn to 'play the part of the young laird and play it well'.[34] When Andrew marries, Mrs. Jackson is delighted to leave the new couple at Rutherfurd and abscond with her husband to the suburb of Pollokshields, having acquired 'a certain amount of aplomb' and 'the status of a county lady' through her short residence in Peeblesshire.[35] While Mr. and Mrs. Jackson acquire the outward trappings of gentility, they remain in their manners and habits solidly middle class.

Nicole and Lady Jane, for their part, bring their gentility with them from Rutherfurd to Harbour House in Kirkmeikle, which they transform into a bastion of a feminised upper middle class respectability. Nicole accepts her family's declining circumstances philosophically and even takes pleasure in their new situation. Now that the Rutherfurds have 'come down

in the world', she wants 'to know everybody there is to know, butcher and baker and candlestick-maker. Yes even the people who live in the smart villas'.[36] Her appreciative interest in the inhabitants of Kirkmeikle soon wins her a heterogeneous circle of friends ranging from the drab and 'profoundly pious' spinster Janet Symington to Mrs. Curle, a joiner's widow.[37] Mrs. Heggie, owner of one the 'smart villas', remarks that before Nicole and her mother arrived in Kirkmeikle 'we were a dull, detached little community, and the Rutherfurds seemed to link us all together in some strange new way. They showed us to each other in a new light, so that we all became better friends. And they do things, take on responsibilities that no one else would dream of'.[38] The Rutherfurd women's sense of responsibility, which leads them to adopt Miss Symington's orphaned nephew Alastair and to ensure that the dying Mrs. Curle's wishes are fulfilled, derives from their former social status. Although Nicole and her mother no longer have much money, they continue to see themselves as benefactresses and to take a proprietary interest in their neighbours' well-being. Lady Jane suggests that gentility is not dependent on wealth when she expresses her fear that the 'new people', as she calls mercantile families like the Jacksons, might fail 'to establish relations with the people who serve them' because 'they look at everything from a business point of view, which means that they want their money's worth and have no use for sentiment'.[39] By bringing their capacity for sentiment to Kirkmeikle, the Rutherfurd women, as Mrs. Heggie observes, infuse the little community with a new appreciation for courtesy, generosity, and good taste – the markers of gentility.

The Proper Place, whose title alludes to a fairy tale by Hans Christian Anderson, questions whether 'place', or social status, is determined by money or behaviour. The fairy tale tells of a magic flute that, when played, sends everyone to their proper place including the unwitting flautist, a baron who ends up in the herdsman's cottage for which his boorish behaviour fits him. While Mr. and Mrs. Jackson take their comic vulgarity back to its supposedly proper place in Glasgow's suburbs, the Rutherfurds do not regain their former estate in Peeblesshire, which is now occupied by Andrew and his status-conscious wife Barbara. Instead, in *The Day of Small Things*, we see Nicole and Lady Jane embrace the 'small things' that fill their seemingly circumscribed existence with contentment – 'A new bit of work, old books to read' and their attention to the many 'women in the world who need comforting'.[40] Through their ministrations, Nicole and Lady Jane

hope to bring the same consolation and enjoyment to these women that Merren Strang in *Pink Sugar* hopes to bring to the readers of her novels, and that O. Douglas aimed to give to her own audience.

The sort of pleasure that Douglas sought to impart to readers requires an appreciation of ordinary beauty. While genteel women like the Rutherfurds seem to possess this aesthetic appreciation almost innately, those like Miss Symington, who have more recently ascended into the upper middle classes, must learn to acquire it, and some, like Mrs. Jackson, may never succeed. Miss Symington inhabits one of Kirkmeikle's 'smart villas', dwellings that display their owners' wealth and lack of taste. The only daughter of a factory owner, Miss Symington is financially independent, with money to spare. Yet after visiting her 'smart villa', Lady Jane remarks, 'It's odd that a woman can live in a house like that and make no effort to make it habitable. I wonder if it has ever occurred to her how ugly everything is'.[41] Evidently this thought hasn't occurred to Miss Symington. Only after she calls on the Rutherfurd women is she struck by the dreariness of her own villa: 'When she opened her own front door and went into the hall she stared round her as if she were seeing it for the first time. After the Harbour House how bare it looked, how bleak'.[42] She begins to wonder if 'many people considered it worth while to do everything in their power to make themselves and their surroundings attractive, but in this fleeting world was it not a waste of time?'.[43] Miss Symington, like Jean Jardine in *Penny Plain*, has been taught to consider all her expenditures of time, money, and ability, within a religious framework, and to account for their relative worth in the eyes of God. When Nicole gives her a 'fragile gilt bowl' as a Christmas present, Miss Symington notices how out of place 'the frivolous, pretty thing' looks in her drab bedroom and is inspired to redecorate her house.[44] She comes to see that nurturing small instances of beauty is neither 'a waste of time' nor an end in itself, but rather a means of bringing happiness into the world and thus a spiritual act or even a kind of religious observance. For, as Nicole asks, 'Would God have troubled to make this world so beautiful if He had wanted us to go about all sad-hued and dreary?'.[45] While tasteful interior decoration may not save souls on the Day of Judgment, it can bring pleasure to others. For Douglas, the creation of beauty that might bring happiness to others is neither a frivolous nor an unimportant endeavour. On the contrary, it is the moral obligation of those who have the means, namely the upper middle class. Miss Symington's new

willingness to spend money on tasteful decoration demonstrates her improved understanding of these obligations and increases her standing in the community. By training readers to recognise and appreciate beauty in ordinary, everyday things, Douglas's fiction sought to impart to them an upper middle class sensibility regardless of their income and social standing.

All of Douglas's novels embody an aesthetics of the ordinary and assert the moral value of mundane forms of beauty. But some are more successful than others at justifying or concealing the socio-economic disparities underlying a seemingly egalitarian aesthetic and moral philosophy. The most successful are perhaps those like *Penny Plain* and *Eliza for Common*, in which it is the protagonist who discovers the happiness that mundane forms of beauty can elicit. In *Eliza for Common*, Eliza Laidlaw's appetite for new aesthetic experiences is whetted by her elder brother Jim, who attends Oxford University. Jim takes Eliza to the theatre in Oxford and London, and accompanies her to Switzerland and France; he introduces her to unfamiliar writers and to a new circle of friends. Eliza's marriage to one of these friends, the English, Oxford-educated Gerald Meade, will enable her 'to have everything beautiful, to go through life in silver slippers'; but this prospect brings with it 'nostalgia for other things – the study at Blinkbonny, shabby and kind and familiar; Rob and Geordie sprawling on the floor; Jim and she arm-in-arm on the sofa; her mother darning in her low chair; her father reading Scott to refresh himself before an evening's visiting in high tenements, or playing a tune on his whistle'.[46] Exposure to the world beyond Blinkbonny prepares Eliza for the upper-middle-class sphere she will occupy once married; but it also awakens her affection for Glasgow and home, both of which had formerly seemed drab and dreary, but which are beautified in memory. Distance reveals to Eliza the sources of comfort and joy that were always part of life at Blinkbonny, but that she had rarely noticed while in their midst. Douglas's argument for the development of an ability to find beauty in everyday experiences and objects is perhaps most convincing in those novels where readers encounter it from the perspective of the protagonist and see her world transformed by it, albeit in small ways.

Douglas's defence of everyday beauty is less successful in novels that take as their protagonist not a woman who learns to appreciate the moral and aesthetic value of tasteful decoration, but one who attempts to teach others its worth. This is most clearly the case in *Pink Sugar*, a novel that exposes the class conflicts that Douglas's aesthetics of the ordinary attempt

to resolve, or at least to conceal. Kirsty Gilmour, the protagonist of *Pink Sugar*, has returned to her native Scotland after years of being 'dragged from one smart hotel to another by a valetudinarian but sprightly step-mother' and has leased a house in the borders with the rather ridiculous but telling name of Little Phantasy.[47] 'Phantasy' (or 'fantasy') can refer to the faculty of sensory perception or to the faculty of imagination, and both senses of the term are relevant in *Pink Sugar*.[48] Kirsty acts out a fantasy of domesticity in her new home, taking in other people's children temporarily and keeping a servant and a cook to take care of the most arduous forms of housework. The pleasure that Kirsty takes in playing house reflects her 'pink sugar view of life', a version of Douglas's own aesthetics of the ordinary.[49] Like the Rutherfurd women in *The Day of Small Things*, Kirsty has learned to savour small pleasures and find joy in everyday beauty – 'summer sun and foxgloves', a 'rose-trimmed hat', or the 'pink sugar hearts' she coveted as a child.[50] Such sources of pleasures require little money to enjoy; they are dependent only on the faculty of sensory perception and are almost always available in some form, even in times of great sadness. Kirsty's friends accuse her of 'wrapping up ugly facts in pink chiffon', but Douglas makes it clear that Kirsty is not blind to her neighbours' problems, nor is she without any of her own.[51] Kirsty acknowledges that precisely because the world is such an imperfect place, full of 'ugly facts', 'we want every crumb of pink sugar that we can get'.[52] Aware that she has more money and leisure than many people, Kirsty aims 'to make just as many people happy as [she] possibly can' by scattering some figurative crumbs of pink sugar their way.[53]

Kirsty's sunny disposition contrasts with the dour practicality of Rebecca Brand, the minister of Muirburn's sister, and the self-pity of Colonel Home, the 'morose bachelor' and war veteran on whose land Kirsty's house is situated.[54] Rebecca is a 'solid, dumpy little person, with her practical ways, her sledge-hammer common sense, her gift for peeling the gilt from the gingerbread'.[55] She seems determined to inflict her disavowal of all forms of pleasure on her brother Robert – for instance, by urging him to subscribe to the didactic periodical *Sunday at Home* rather than the *Times Literary Supplement*, which he would far rather read. On her own bookshelf, the writings of Marcus Aurelius reside beside the Bible and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, a collection consonant with Rebecca's stoic reconciliation to things as they are. While Marcus Aurelius and the Bible preach the

endurance of suffering, *Little Women* describes the efforts of Jo March and her sisters to 'make do' during the deprivations imposed by the American Civil War, as well as Jo's attempts to conceal her unrequited love for the handsome and wealthy Laurie.[56] Like Jo, Rebecca has a secret love. The 'one touch of romance' in her existence is her adoration of 'the young laird', Colonel Home, who 'seemed to her all the heroes of legend and fairy tale come to life'.[57] Rebecca's dream of marrying the Colonel, a man her superior in rank and wealth, suggests that even she, despite her seeming acceptance of the dreariness of existence, is susceptible to romance. Kirsty, for her part, is far from regarding Colonel Home as a knight in shining armour, initially describing him as 'the very angriest man I ever came across'.[58] His anger is a legacy of the Great War, which has left him disillusioned and slightly disabled, with a permanent limp.

Whereas Rebecca is prone to 'peeling the gilt from the gingerbread', or actively excising the smallest of aesthetic pleasures from daily life, Colonel Home is only guilty of failing to appreciate everyday beauty. When the Colonel speaks in a 'bitter and hopeless' tone of the limp caused by his war wounds, Kirsty, in a moment of uncharacteristic anger, chides him for failing to be 'grateful enough for the good things God had given him', for failing to appreciate 'the beauty of the glen, the sound of the water, the crying of birds, and the sweet-scented air'.[59] She cries, 'How can you! I don't say the dead weren't the lucky ones – they made a great finish – but think, won't you, about all the poor men still lying in hospital, the blinded men, the men who lost their reason – and others trying to earn their bread and failing to find work. They were all willing to give their lives, but they were asked to do a much harder thing in these days – to live [. . .] Oh, you should be down on your knees thanking Heaven fasting'.[60] The argument that the war had left others much worse off than Colonel Home might seem naïve and even ungracious on Kirsty's part if she didn't acknowledge that living through the war might be more difficult than dying in it. After all, Colonel Home is not only surrounded by natural beauty and in possession of his senses; he is the owner of a prosperous estate and enjoys all the benefits that come with rank and wealth. When Kirsty points out his 'grousing' to him, the Colonel begins to notice these fairly considerable sources of pleasure. Not least among them is Kirsty herself, whom the Colonel finds as charming as if she was 'the Queen of Elfland'.[61]

However, Rebecca is less susceptible to these charms than Colonel Home,

and her biting criticisms of Kirsty's 'pink sugar' philosophy expose the socio-economic privilege it depends upon. If, in *The Proper Place*, Janet Symington is receptive to Nicole's efforts to introduce the beauty of ornamentation into her drab existence, it is perhaps because Janet has more money than Nicole and can easily afford to implement the improvements Nicole suggests. By contrast, Rebecca resents, and on several occasions rejects, Kirsty's similar attempts to bring 'colour' into her life. She asks Kirsty bluntly, 'did you ever think how irritating unwanted kindness can be to the recipient? Did you ever think how much more grace it requires to be a receiver than a giver? From the first I could feel you saying to yourself, "Oh, the poor plain good little thing! I must be kind to her and try to brighten life for her a little" '.[62] Rebecca's resentment of Kirsty's kindness perhaps stems from her comparative poverty. While Kirsty spends her days playing house at Little Phantasy, Rebecca runs the manse singlehandedly because she and her brother cannot afford to keep a servant, and sometimes feels that her life is 'one long preparing of meals and clearing them away'.[63] Rebecca implies that she would have been happier without Kirsty's overtures of friendship, which have only served to make her aware of what she lacks. 'You had everything I hadn't', Rebecca explains; 'I never knew how plain I was till I saw you'.[64] For her part, Kirsty has never given much thought to the fact that her comparative affluence underlies many of the simple pleasures that she enjoys, including the pleasure of sharing her joys with others. Before her awkward conversation with Rebecca, 'Kirsty had taken it more or less for granted that every one lay in bed till morning tea was brought to them, and then went into a well-warmed bathroom smelling of the best kinds of bath salts, and bathed and dressed at leisure'.[65] Despite her desire to 'brighten life' for Rebecca, Kirsty has never really understood *why* the minister's sister's clothes are so plain and the manse so drab until Rebecca describes what 'doing with as little as possible' is like.[66]

Although *Pink Sugar* acknowledges the potential for condescension in Kirsty's desire to help others find crumbs of beauty, it is unable to satisfactorily resolve the socio-economic conflict informing Rebecca's criticisms. Whereas Rebecca sees Kirsty's generosity as 'a form of selfishness' – a way of making 'everyone pleased and happy around you so that you may feel pleased and happy' – Kirsty views the fortune she has inherited as a liability, and hopes that if she continues 'collecting people and providing for them at the rate she was doing, the fortune her father had left her

would soon cease to be a burden'.[67] Kirsty's understanding of other people as objects to be collected and as so many means of ridding herself of her burdensome fortune suggests that there is truth in Rebecca's claim that Kirsty's kindness is a form of selfishness, or at least self-gratification. Although Kirsty does not renounce her mission to bring 'colour' into Rebecca's life, she does come to realise that generosity can look like condescension, and so finds a way to conceal her aim. When Kirsty learns that the novelist Merren Strang is planning a trip to Italy, she asks Merren to invite Rebecca to accompany her as a companion. Unbeknownst to Rebecca, Kirsty rather than Merren will cover the costs of her travel. The only problem with the plan is that Merren doesn't really want a companion. She complains to Kirsty, 'Your living for others, my dear, makes life very difficult for your friends. There's nothing I enjoy so much as going about alone, following my own free will, and Rebecca, I know, will gloom disapprovingly at the pictures'.[68] Although voiced much more gently, Merren's complaint is not very different than Rebecca's: both perceive Kirsty's desire to be generous as selfish in that it causes inconvenience or embarrassment to others. Undeterred, Kirsty argues that the trip will bring more pleasure to Rebecca than suffering to Merren, who acknowledges that 'there is a tremendous satisfaction in doing what you feel to be your duty, and a great deal of happiness got that way'.[69]

Douglas seems unable to rescue Kirsty from the charges of condescension and selfishness levelled at her by Rebecca, and to a lesser extent, by Merren. However, by changing the narrative focus in the final chapter so that we are given Rebecca's rather than Kirsty's perspective, she salvages Kirsty's 'pink sugar' philosophy. If Kirsty learns that the appreciation of mundane beauty is made easier by money, Rebecca, for her part, eventually comes to believe in the moral value of tasteful ornamentation. When Rebecca hears of Kirsty's engagement to Colonel Home, whom she has long adored from a distance, she imagines with shame 'how amused every one would be if they knew that she, Rebecca Brand, the little, plain, ill-dressed, unattractive sister of the minister, had been dreaming dreams about the laird of Phantasy'.[70] Interestingly, Rebecca does not imagine that her poverty might render her an unfit wife for Colonel Home; instead it is her dowdiness that she fixates on – her failure to make herself more attractive to behold. Rebecca imagines herself to be 'utilitarian, like a vegetable garden', whereas Kirsty is 'like a flower garden, something fair and pleasant to

delight all comers – something fragrant to be remembered'.[71] Flowers, Rebecca realises, are not merely frivolous indulgences; they have a use too – to bring enjoyment to those who behold them. Rebecca is shocked to realise that 'self-complacency' has led her to confuse the rejection of aesthetic pleasures, or pink sugar, with virtue.[72] The novel ends not with Kirsty, its ostensible protagonist, but with Rebecca heading downstairs to make a pudding: 'not a plain rice pudding as she had at first intended, but a bread pudding with jam on top, and switched white of egg to make an ornamentation'.[73] Even something as ordinary as a pudding can be made more pleasurable with a little effort; for, as Rebecca acknowledges, 'if you are clever about that sort of thing, beauty costs no more than ugliness'.[74] Rebecca learns that to neglect opportunities to adorn or embellish what is plain or undistinguished is to neglect opportunities to bring happiness to others – and to oneself.

Yet, in terms of the novel's structure, Rebecca perhaps learns this lesson too late. In most of Douglas's novels, women who learn to appreciate the significance of small beauties are rewarded with marriage. Eliza in *Eliza for Common* and Jean in *Penny Plain* make marriages that raise them into a higher social class, one that their new understanding of the aesthetics of the ordinary has prepared them to occupy. Even brusque Janet Symington in *The Proper Place* elicits a proposal from a widower clergyman after she begins to adorn her home and her person. In *Pink Sugar*, however, it is Kirsty who makes the good marriage while Rebecca must make do with an all-expenses-paid trip to Italy. Debbie Sly has argued persuasively that 'although most of Douglas's novels do end in marriage, their emotional heart is elsewhere',[75] and *Pink Sugar* offers numerous examples of unmarried women living happy and fulfilling lives. It would be a mistake to see Douglas as condemning Rebecca to miserable spinsterhood as punishment for her aesthetic insensibility; but Colonel Home's fascination with Kirsty's charms does emphasise by contrast Rebecca's belated awareness of her own failure to please.

Rebecca Brand is the most problematic instance of a figure that appears frequently in Douglas's fiction – the woman who has learned under the auspices of the Free Church 'to think it wrong to spend much time or money on [her] appearance' or surroundings and who must be taught the moral and aesthetic value of tasteful decoration.[76] Although Douglas counters the Free Church's disavowal, and indeed disapproval, of embellishment –

whether sartorial, artistic, or literary – her novels by no means reject the Church's influence entirely. After all, their religious training is what enables Rebecca, Janet, Eliza, Jean, and other Free Church women to understand beautification as a moral duty of sorts, a way of bringing happiness not only to oneself but to others. And once they have learned this lesson, their Calvinist sensibilities prevent these characters from taking the decoration of their persons and surroundings to distasteful extremes. Douglas's aesthetics of the ordinary offers a middle way between deprivation and excess, austerity and frivolity. Following the lead of Edwin Muir, literary critics have tended to see the legacies of Calvinism as repressing or negating an authentic Scottish identity.[77] Yet Douglas's fiction lends support to Cairns Craig's suggestion that we might see it instead as a generative element of such an identity.[78] Douglas's aesthetics of the ordinary finds in Scotland's Calvinist heritage the potential for a distinctively Protestant form of beauty – unostentatious but striking in its simplicity, inspiring critical appreciation and providing contentment without complacency. Her aesthetics of the ordinary also claims a place for women in the Scottish history of the novel, eschewing the 'Big Bow-wow strain' of Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson to offer instead a tastefully embellished version of everyday domestic and social life between the wars.[79]

Notes

1 Wendy Forrester, *Anna Buchan and O. Douglas* (London: The Maitland Press, 1995), p. 60.

2 Douglas does receive a few sentences in Robert Crawford's *Scotland's Books: A History of Scottish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 528–29 and several rather scathing pages in Beth Dickson, 'Annie S. Swan and O. Douglas: Legacies of the Kailyard', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 329–46 (pp. 341–45). Edwin Morgan includes Douglas's *The Setons* in his *Twentieth Century Scottish Classics* (Glasgow: Book Trust Scotland, 1987), p. 4.

3 Anna Buchan, *Unforgettable, Unforgotten* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1945), p. 130. In keeping with her own practices, I refer to Anna Buchan as 'Douglas' when discussing her novels and 'Buchan' when referring to the historical personage.

4 greyladiesbooks.co.uk/pages/articles.html

5 Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 11.

6 For example, see Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Scottish Modernism and its Contexts 1918–1959: Literature, National Identity, and Cultural Exchange* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); and *Scottish and International Modernisms: Relationships and Reconfigurations*, ed. by Emma Dymock and Margery Palmer McCulloch (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2011).
7 Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 10.
8 Humble, p. 11.
9 On the emergence of an expanded middle class see John Stevenson, *British Society, 1914–1945* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 331–35. On women's roles in interwar Britain, see Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1914–1939* (London: Pandora, 1989).
10 See, for instance, Heather Ingman, *Women's Fiction between the Wars: Mothers, Daughters, and Writing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*; and Light, *Forever England*.
11 Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 27.
12 Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 201.
13 Buchan, *Unforgettable, Unforgotten*, p. 23.
14 O. Douglas, *Eliza for Common* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1930), p. 65.
15 Ibid., pp. 76, 65.
16 Ibid., p. 65.
17 Ibid., p. 81.
18 O. Douglas, *Penny Plain* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1920), p. 39.
19 Ibid., pp. 90, 139, 61.
20 Ibid., p. 33.
21 Ibid., p. 34.
22 See Victoria Stewart, 'The Woman Writer in Mid-Twentieth Century Middlebrow Fiction: Conceptualizing Creativity', *Journal of Modern Literature* 35 (2011), pp. 21–36.
23 O. Douglas, *Pink Sugar* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1926), p. 98.
24 National Library of Scotland Acc. 11627. The quotation is taken from one of Buchan's unpublished lectures called 'Writers and Readers'.
25 Douglas, *Pink Sugar*, p. 98.
26 See Hugh Kenner, *A Sinking Island: The Modern English Writers* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1989), pp. 18–42.
27 Douglas, *Pink Sugar*, p. 50
28 Ibid., p. 99.
29 Quoted in Forrester, p. 59.
30 O. Douglas, *The Proper Place* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1926), p. 60.
31 Ibid., p. 60.
32 Ibid., p. 243.
33 O. Douglas, *The Day of Small Things* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1933), p. 181.
34 Douglas, *The Proper Place*, p. 53.
35 Douglas, *Day of Small Things*, p. 120.
36 Douglas, *The Proper Place*, p. 75.
37 Ibid., p. 63.
38 Douglas, *Day of Small Things*, p. 19.

39 Ibid., p. 164.
40 Ibid., pp. 280, 279.
41 Douglas, *The Proper Place*, p. 87.
42 Ibid., p. 115.
43 Ibid., p. 153.
44 Ibid., p. 151.
45 Ibid., p. 198.
46 Douglas, *Eliza for Common*, pp. 349, 361.
47 Douglas, *Pink Sugar*, p. 9.
48 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. 'phantasy'.
49 Douglas, *Pink Sugar*, p. 156.
50 Ibid., pp. 155–56.
51 Ibid., p. 15.
52 Ibid., p. 156.
53 Ibid., p. 16.
54 Ibid., p. 40.
55 Ibid., p. 29.
56 Humble observes that Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* 'is among the most popular of novels with the characters of the feminine middlebrow' (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 173). Shirley Foster and Judy Simon argue that the novel was dear to generations of female readers because it provides models of both conservative and radical womanhood – of 'female domesticity' and 'creative independence'. See *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of 'Classic' Stories for Girls* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1995), p. 87.
57 Douglas, *Pink Sugar*, p. 137.
58 Ibid., p. 51.
59 Ibid., p. 107.
60 Ibid., p. 108.
61 Ibid., p. 155.
62 Ibid., p. 233.
63 Ibid., p. 234.
64 Ibid., p. 234.
65 Ibid., p. 250.
66 Ibid., p. 234.
67 Ibid., pp. 233, 251.
68 Ibid., p. 237.
69 Ibid., p. 177.
70 Ibid., p. 285.
71 Ibid., pp. 286, 287.
72 Ibid., p. 287.
73 Ibid., p. 288.
74 Ibid., p. 287.
75 Debbie Sly, 'Pink Sugary Pleasures: Reading the Novels of O. Douglas', *The Journal of Popular Culture* (2001), pp. 5–19 (p. 15).
76 Douglas, *The Proper Place*, p. 120.
77 Muir blames Calvinism for Scotland's failure to develop a national literature. See *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer*, intro. by Allan Massie (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1982), esp. pp. 44–51.
78 Craig, p. 35.

79 Scott used this phrase to distinguish his own style from Jane Austen's 'exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting'. See Ioan Williams, ed. *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1968), p. 8.

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